

# **Self-Esteem**

*By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder*

Seems like everywhere I look, I see speeches, courses, workshops, and seminars being given on self-esteem. In the last ten years, it has been discovered that self-esteem is the key to well-being. But we knew that, didn't we? I guess if anyone ever asked what is the key to recovery, the answer most certainly would be the degree of self-esteem we enjoy. There is just no way we can stay sober unless we have some good feelings about ourselves.

But therein is the catch, the Catch 22. We were drinking because of the despair we felt, the feeling of frustration we felt because of the life problems we had difficulty handling.

That's the paradox. We must quit drinking so we can handle our problems but our negative feelings do not provide us with any measure of self-esteem!

Obviously, the most important part of our recovery is a building of our self-esteem and that's not easy. For many years we have had negative feelings about ourselves and suddenly we must turn these around and become a positive person so that we can stay sober!

Our actions in life are always a result of what we think about ourselves, how we feel about ourselves. An interesting experiment is to ask others how they see us and we'll be quite surprised to learn their assessment of us, almost certainly a different picture of us than we have of ourselves.

It is almost common for all of us to devalue ourselves. We think much better of others than we do of ourselves. Are we afraid to let ourselves know anything positive about ourselves? Is our denial of our self-worth allied with our earlier denial of our alcohol problems? Has denial become such an integral part of our life that its tentacles have reached every area of our personality? Some think denial has a life of its own -- it permits our problem to flourish and is picked up by those around us. We can go on saying, "*I never did that,*" or "*How could I ever?*" Others around us pickup these negatives.

Some believe it is helpful to look back to our actions when we were drinking and to examine those feelings about ourselves to see if our feelings then are still damaging ourselves now. Few of us, if any, can come away from our drinking experiences with anything that comes close to a positive self-image. To counteract these debilitating feelings we have about our drinking, we easily move into all phases of denial. Our actions are so destructive to our feelings of well-being, we deny they ever happened. We become expert in putting the ugly into a box and shoving it under the bed. We simply act as if our despicable behavior never happened.

It is obvious how long the road is to our complete recovery. It stretches before us. We can also see the crying necessity for our change of old thoughts. None of this happens until we can clearly see ourselves. Until we can see what we need to do. Very often that's a long time coming. Our denial has often entombed us.

There are some who know and acknowledge their negative feelings but feel hopeless about changing them. Day after day I read about this feeling of hopelessness in the letters that come into the office. Women express the need but feel helpless. For women, this feeling of helplessness is all part of our social conditioning -- that others always had power over us, that others set the rule for our behavior. Women have great difficulty coping with these feelings, even have difficulty with defining them.

So where to begin? The first is to discover our true feelings about ourselves. Exactly how do we

feel? Have we been saying, “*My drinking wasn’t all that bad,*” or “*I never drank in a bar.*”?

Or were our feelings the exact opposite of that: “*I made such a fool of myself; I’ll never be able to look anyone in the eye ever again.*”

No matter which of these categories we fall into, obviously it is necessary to recognize our problem with alcohol and **that we have the power to overcome.**

Recovery happens when we know that we can take charge of ourselves, that we have the power within us to be a new person.

Others around us may try to dictate our behavior, but this is the time to begin with self-assertion. We need not only to know we want to get well but that we can get well.

If we are able to be in a treatment facility, then we have begun to think about ourselves in positive feelings -- hopefully. Facilities with women’s programs begin this process for us. We begin to learn “how”. Unfortunately, too many treatment facilities do not have a program for women and then we must begin the process of self-imagining when we get home. We must learn the most important lesson we’ll ever come into contact with -- all that filters through our mind influences our experiences. We create our new selves through the thoughts we form. We cannot change old, bad experiences but we can change how we think about those old past experiences. By doing this, we will no longer carry all that old baggage with us into our recovery.

Our mind is never at rest unless we still it with alcohol or drugs. In sobriety, when we want rest from disturbing thoughts, we can exercise, meditate, and do yoga, garden, or any number of things.

When we acknowledge the power of our thoughts and how that affects our life’s experiences, we have learned the most important law of life. Not until I learned this was I able to take charge of my alcoholism and my life.

This should be your gift to yourself -- to know you have the power within you to countermand all the negative things you’ve ever been told – “You can’t do it,” “As a woman, you must know your place,” etc., etc., etc.

Begin today to grab hold of your thoughts and, consequently, your life. Begin positive self-imagining. Never underestimate the power of the messages you can give yourself. Our mind is a flip chart waiting to be written on. And the messages we write are those which will form us, create the new woman we are becoming. In our “New Life” Program we have a good sentence to begin with:

***I AM A CARING, CAPABLE, COMPETENT, COMPASSIONATE WOMAN.***

It is also a very good idea to remember that we are responsible for our actions now that we are sober and into recovery.

Our “New Life” Program gives us all of the knowledge we need to become the wonderful women we should be. Just as the 12th Statement is important for daily use, so too is our 9th Statement, ***“The past is gone forever.”*** That means we give up all our emotional payment for experiences that happened to us in past time. We cannot change them; we can only accept the knowledge that they -- our terrible negative experiences -- are over.

By pursuing a daily systematic recitation of our new hoped-for image, we will soon discover that it is happening, that we feel a new inner strength, that we have a whole new feeling of freedom

having jettisoned our baggage of bad experiences.

As we begin to live with our new feelings as a competent woman, we will gradually begin to have some self-esteem.

We can see there is a pattern:

- \* **Learn the biggest secret of life -- our thoughts can change everything.**
- \* **Every day work on self-imaging. Never miss a day. We will then become that person.**
- \* **Know that we no longer have to continually pay for past mistakes: The past is gone forever and we can change how we think about it even if we can't change past events. We can know our negative experiences were a result of our negative life style.**

To have self-esteem, we must learn to like ourselves and then finally love ourselves. This seems a long way away from many of us who once said, *"I hate myself. I wish I weren't alive."*

Yes, it is a long, long road but it is a road that is filled with wonderful experiences as we turn ourselves around. We will never be sorry we took this road to recovery, because we will find a happiness we never thought possible. We will also have learned so many of the important lessons of life -- that our problems do not have to manipulate us but that we are in charge and can take care of our problems in a rational non-disruptive way.

Yes, it's worth it. Just give it a try. You'll never be sorry.

### **Positive Aids To Help With A Self-Image**

Many women write to us and say they want help but can't get to meetings (or don't want to go to meetings) but that they want help.

This is not impossible. Our recovery is how we learn to know ourselves and how we can change. So how can this happen? Let me suggest use of some of our many workbooks. Their value for self-revelation cannot be measured.

There are workbooks on:

- \* Self-Esteem
- \* Coping With Stress
- \* Communicating
- \* Relationships
- \* Anger: The Workbook
- \* Self-Analyzers
- \* Considerations
- \* The "New Life" Diary

And perhaps one of the best ways to help one's self-image is to use cassette tapes. Many women listen to these in their autos while driving to work. The available cassette tapes cover almost every aspect of recovery:

- \* The Program Booklet
- \* Combating Depression

- \* The Woman Alcoholic
- \* So You Want To Quit?
- \* Happiness & Sobriety
- \* Self-Imaging
- \* The First Year
- \* Guilt Feelings
- \* Special Needs of Women Alcoholics
- \* Breaking Dependencies/ Anger & Women
- \* Goal-Setting
- \* WFS & AA
- \* Handling Anger (1990 WFS Members)
- \* Relationships (1990 WFS Members)
- \* Women & Recovery (1991 speech)
- \* Keys to Recovery (1984 speech)

There are many more tapes available -- tapes about the Program Statements -- but these tapes (above) will certainly do much toward your achievement of a positive self-image.

Recovery -- our recovery -- comes from our application of self to revelation and gradual growth. None of this happens without our making it happen. Although attendance at meetings is admirable, we must add much more to this. I've known persons who have stayed sober for many years by attending 2 meetings a week but they have never grown. They are sober. Period.

Life can be so much more fulfilling when we are tuned into ourselves, when we have identified our weaknesses and work to overcome these.

The WFS "New Life" Program means growth, growth, and more growth. It means that we learn how to take charge of ourselves and our life. It means dynamic living because we have unlocked the key to ourselves. ☞ [July 1995]

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Comments from Becky "beckywfs":

What a great way to start off your new life with a healthy dose of self-esteem. It reminds me of the old saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." If every day, like Jean suggested, we work on our positive affirmations to build up that newly precious self-esteem, than we would truly not feel the need to fall back on the various negative addictions that helped us escape from facing the problems of the real world.

Building the foundation for my life with self-esteem gives me the strength for endurance and resiliency in the times of change. Even if you have a few 'weak areas' in your self-esteem's foundation, it doesn't mean that you're going to fall apart or that you're not trying hard enough. I've learned enough in my lifetime not to go running out the door screaming and crying every time someone tries undermining my confidence and pushing my buttons. What I do instead is look inward, while meditating and doing deep breathing exercises, and I am reassured that it's normal to go through 'growing pains' until I reach the next level of emotional maturity and confidence. I'm also learning how to be flexible yet strong in my belief in my capabilities and self-worth.

This is what I wish for all of our members... to be strong but flexible enough to adjust and accept all the changes that go on around you and especially the changes that occur within you. Embrace your new life... it's worth every minute! ☞ [January 2002]

Comments from "LindaBenny":

Self-esteem, to me, seemed to be one of those elusive things. Either you have it or you don't. I've had self-esteem issues all of my life...the feeling that I am just not good enough.

That's what **self-esteem** is. **How we feel about ourselves. How we relate to what we believe to be true about ourselves.** If we feel like we are garbage, not worth a darn thing, then that's how we will treat ourselves. As Jean says in her article, "**We**

***were drinking because of the despair we felt, the feeling of frustration we felt because of the life problems we had difficulty handling.”***

Perhaps, like me, you’ve had self-esteem problems for years. These negative images about ourselves come from years of useless comparisons with those around us, things we’ve been told by other people, blowing mistakes out of proportion until they become a tumbling avalanche that overwhelms us. **Just like any other habit, self-esteem comes from practice.** A negative self-esteem can become so ingrained that we just feel that that is who we are...a loser. And, gratefully, like any other habit, **self-esteem can be changed.**

Jean says ***“The most important part of our recovery is building our self-esteem”*** and I believe that to be a very true statement. We must be able to think positively about ourselves to succeed. This doesn’t mean that we have to love ourselves right away, or even love everything that we do. Like anything else, self-esteem takes building. You don’t just wake up one day with it. It has to be a “habit that we develop.”

In my first few weeks, I remember I was terrified to leave my bed. I didn’t trust myself to be able to do the next right thing. I knew, though, that I didn’t want to be stuck in my bed forever. I made a plan for myself – **take small steps and congratulate myself along the way, no matter how small the step was.** One day, I decided to venture into the kitchen to put away the dishes. I shook, I trembled with anxiety. I remember putting away the dishes so quickly so I could run back and jump under my covers. When I was back in bed, I thought “Well, that wasn’t so bad! Great job, Linda!” A voice in my head started telling me “Oh it was only the dishes” but I squashed that voice.

The next day, feeling pretty good about my accomplishment with the dishes, I decided to clean up part of the living room. And within the next month, I was doing small and simple tasks and taking pride in being able to do these things well...do these things without drinking. Eventually, and this was a biggie, I made it out to the mail box. I remember hugging the mail as I ran my bare feet back inside and rolling on the floor with laughter. I felt so great! These were things that, a month before, seemed absolutely impossible.

The key here was that I congratulated myself for the small things. I gained confidence in myself for each accomplishment, no matter how “small”. And so it goes with self-esteem. **We have to get rid of alllllll of the expectations of who we “should” be and what we “ought” to be doing. The “shoulds” are a real self-esteem killer. If we have an idea of perfection and fail to live up to that ideal, we will feel like failures.** We also have to be really and truly willing to let go of the “old, negative tapes”. They’ve been with us for a long, long time; those thoughts that play over and over “I’ll never be enough” “I’m a loser” “I’m nothing but a drunk.” These thoughts are like false friends. They always seem to be around, but we don’t really need them.

We get rid of the “old negative tapes” by replacing them with **new, affirming tapes.** Jean says ***“Recovery happens when we know we can take charge of ourselves, that we have the power within us to be a NEW PERSON”.*** Start out by trying to find the things you like about yourself. Are you kind? Do you smile at strangers? Do you feed stray kittens? What things do you like about yourself? Write these things down – it is a powerful tool to pull out when the nasty negatives pop up. And, every day, keep building on those positive things. Really examine the life you are living RIGHT NOW (the past is, after all, gone forever) and think about the things you are doing RIGHT NOW that are great!

And never ever forget the power of thought. We are what we think. This is an excerpt from the WFS Levels of Recovery booklet: ***“Our lives reflect the thoughts we have. If we are dominated by powerful negative thoughts, we will have disturbing and disruptive lives. There are times when we feel at odds with life; we may have nagging, disturbing thoughts and not be able to understand why we feel this way. But if we take a moment to examine our mind, we will find that we are having very upsetting thoughts – anger, jealousy, feelings of shame...We pay the price for our bad thoughts.”***

- What does your self-esteem look like?
- What are your thoughts about yourself?
- Do you feel like it is difficult to like or love yourself?
- What are the major hurdles for you when it comes to liking who you are?
- What resentments are you harboring that you could let go? ☹ [January 2013]

Comments from Karen “Coral63”:

**Self-esteem.** For years I tried to catch it, only to find it ever elusive. I tried to get it from men. I tried to get it from money. I tried to get it from shopping. I tried to get it from the past. I tried to get it on the internet (Amazon didn’t have it), I tried to get it from the future, I tried to get it from outside of myself, I tried to get it from a 12 oz. can, again and again and again. I failed, *thankfully, every single time.*

Self-esteem is not magic, nor is it supernatural. Self-esteem is the value that we place within ourselves that comes from deep inside us. It is respect, it is worth, it is assurance and satisfaction, all rolled up into one attitude. It is also almost nonexistent while in the throes of active addiction.

Jean remarks, ***“The Catch 22.”*** It is paradoxical. We want to feel good about ourselves, but our drinking removes almost all feelings of self-worth. In order to increase our self-esteem, we need to be embracing sobriety and growth. A seemingly endless cycle of cynicism plays out. The negativity experienced by women in active addiction acts as a buffer against growth. Many of us

can relate to feelings of inadequacy and lack. We sometimes acknowledge this, and other times remain steeped in denial. Frequently, many of us perceived how another “had it all, did it all, and became it all,” not once realizing that we too could have and be everything that we wanted to be.

Jean asks us **“Are we afraid to let ourselves know anything positive about ourselves?”** Also, **“Is our denial of our self-worth allied with our earlier denial of our alcohol problems?”** Jean continues with **“Has denial become such an integral part of our life that its tentacles have reached every area of our personality?”** Our answers to these questions set us out on a journey of self-discovery and development of healthy self-esteem.

In my own journey, I lived in an unhealthy mix of ‘victimology’ and fear; which became the catalyst for self-destructive behaviors. I wanted out of the vicious cycle that I felt imprisoned in; but, yet, I felt so deeply that I could not achieve life the way it was “supposed “ to be. I remained unchanged and inebriated. Life was illusory and negative.

Jean states, **“We have the power to overcome.”** She knew. Jean *really* knew that each one of us, each single person, has the ability to overcome. I cannot state for certain that I knew I had the power those first few weeks of sobriety; however, I knew **what wasn’t working** for me and I had become willing to try something different. I felt exhausted, but also very receptive.

There is no magic formula or complex equation that will solve problems of low or no self-esteem. It begins with our thoughts, plain and simple. Statement #5, **“I am what I think,”** encourages us to let go of the negative self-talk and to embrace positive affirmations. Jean shares with us **“Begin today to grab hold of your thoughts, and consequently, your life. Begin positive self-imagining. Never underestimate the power of the messages you can give yourself.”** Jean goes on with **“In our ‘New Life’ Program we have a good sentence to begin with: I AM A CARING, CAPABLE, COMPETENT, COMPASSIONATE WOMAN.”**

Repeating positive affirmations is one of the ways in which I have turned my thoughts around. Creating healthy new patterns in my life also have included taking necessary actions, such as my morning journaling. When I am through reading the Statements, I journal “I AMs.” “I am open,” “I am healthy,” “I am growing,” “I am worthy,” “I am joyful,” “I am forgiving.” My list is endless. Each morning I add another “I am” to the list and read them out loud, so I hear myself, really *listen* to what I am saying and I affirm that I can be everything I desire. A number of days I have wanted to skip this routine or avoid it altogether; but, I am honest with myself, and continue to create and uncover me.

One of the most empowering ways to take action in creating a New Life in WFS that Jean mentions has been the WFS workbooks that are available for purchase. Jean lists a number of important topics which can be found here:

[http://www.wfscatalog.org/Workbooks\\_c5.htm](http://www.wfscatalog.org/Workbooks_c5.htm).

Another way to develop a healthy self-image that Jean shares with us is with audio CDs and now video DVDs available for purchase on the WFS Catalog site which can be found here: [http://www.wfscatalog.org/Audio-Video\\_c4.htm](http://www.wfscatalog.org/Audio-Video_c4.htm).

Face to face meetings, online meetings, online message boards, the monthly newsletter, books, booklets, workbooks, CDs and DVDs are just some of the many tools that we can use to enhance our outlook and create the life we desire. Jean mentions, **“Recovery—our recovery—comes from our application of self to revelation and gradual growth. None of this happens without making it happen.”**

Actions, even the smallest of actions, contribute to our wellness. Making my bed every morning, WFS, painting, meditating, deep breathing exercises, drawing, Tai chi, moderating a group, all contribute to creating healthy self-esteem.

Inaction is the flip side of action to increasing self-esteem, from the cessation of drinking to the avoidance of destructive drama; inaction has become one of my best friends. Remaining silent when not asked for my opinion had been quite a challenge for me, but I am getting better every day in many ways. By removing debilitating dramas, which can include situations or people, I can enjoy strength and stability while discovering life.

By failing to achieve self-esteem from outside sources, I learned to go within and acquire an incredible wealth I really never knew existed. Just as Becky mentions in her comments at the end of this article, “Building the foundation for my life with self-esteem gives me the strength for endurance and resiliency in times of change,” we, too, lay the foundation for our lives one brick of self-esteem at a time.

- **What actions help, or have helped, you increase your feelings of self-esteem?**
- **What inactions help, or have helped, you to increase your feelings of self-esteem?**

A sincere and heartfelt Thank-You goes out to Jean and each and every woman who makes this program flourish! 🌸 [January 2013]